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The Arts in Civic Life: The Ivory Street

1.

Welcome, *bienvenidos*, Thank you Shelley and thank you all. I am so happy to be here. I want to thank everybody who has welcomed me here, especially the Arts Commission's Shelley Cohn, Paul Morris, and Kevin Vaughan-Brubaker, who was my former student. It's great to be here.

Well, the arts. I don't know what that does when people say that. I will tell you what it does for me. Shelley was mentioning my going to the University of Arizona. When I was a student, instead of ID cards, they used to give you little fee receipts and that's how you would check stuff out from the library and so on. If you were in liberal arts, over to the side it said L-arts. And if you were in fine arts…. I still have it.

Let me start this way: I am an artist, an arts administrator, an arts advocate, an arts consumer. I've been passionate about the arts, but neglectful, too. I like some things, and I don't like others. I read the arts section in the newspapers. All of this, and more—you get the idea. You and I, we're alike. It's a job and a life both. It's hard sometimes, and very easy sometimes, but always difficult to explain. I was very excited this morning to hear the RAND report. I had not read the preview version of the report, but after hearing it this morning I think the report is going to give us some new language for a dialogue in the arts as we articulate ourselves to the world. I found it informative and affirmative.

I'd like to start with a poem of introduction, something of an invocation. We're all in this room, gathered, some friends, some strangers.

Family

I have had a family and been part of a family.
I have had a child and been a child.

I have loved my mother and my father,
My son and my daughter, my wife and my husband.

I'm not the only one.
There are others complicit in this scheme.

We have moved through the years toward and away from each other
Inexplicably—perhaps it was the moon.

But here we are now, a roomful of strangers,
We say. We introduce each other to each other.

What happens next, happens every time.
We talk and then we are caught by some shiny thing

Like fish—but for us the hook is a curious name, a phrase,
The smells of coffee and orange blossoms,

The names of all the animals we have had,
Something about where you were born and where I was born.

This next part surprises us every time—
I am in your family tree and you are in mine.

If we can't find the connection going back a hundred years,
We will find it going back a thousand.

Through all those years I have gone by many names,
Tried on different clothes, painted myself different colors.

How lucky to have found each other again today,
How lucky, and how many stories we bring to tell,

So many of them happy, though some are not and will be news.
Hello, I say to you, again after all these centuries.

2.

Let's continue by saying some radical things. But what I mean by radical may surprise you. The first definition of "radical" in my Random House Webster's College Dictionary is: 1. of or going to the root or origin; fundamental. Radical's first definition, then, is what is closest to us, not furthest and not strangest. Scientists in the group will know this. This suggests, then, that radical change or radical action begins with each of us. That gives us a very clear and very strong starting point.

There's a metaphor I use when I explain education to people. We don't explain education to each other very well anymore, if indeed we ever did. We tell kids, for example, *you have to go to school*. We don't say why, just that you have to. Or if we do say why, it's about what education is somehow going to get you or do for you. We rarely talk about the intrinsic value of education itself, of a love for it, of an understanding of it, any of which might serve us better than the almost punitive way in which we offer it now.

The metaphor is simple—it's a slingshot. You've all seen a slingshot. The way it works regarding education is simple and profound. When you go to school, to first grade and most grades after that until you get to college, the first thing you do is work backward. You open a book and read about what's been done. You learn who did what, what happened where, why things occurred when. What's happening is that you are working backward, but in an effort to move forward, to get ahead. And that's what school is, a place to get ahead. But how does moving backward help you move forward? Yet this, of course, is the essence of education, even if it sounds like a conundrum.

A very simple and effective way to understand how this does indeed work, however, is to hold a slingshot in your hand. As long as you hold onto the stem—that is, as long as you know why you're doing this—then the farther back you pull, you know what is happening or about to happen. Yes there's tension, yes it hurts, yes it's work. You can feel it. But when you finally let go—that is, when you graduate—you can see

it, you can see what happens. You can feel it. After having gone so far backward, you know you will be propelled forward, and at a thousand miles an hour, or whatever—I should have paid more attention in science class. But the moment of release will feel like something. Graduation will feel like something. Education will feel like something.

I didn't go to school that way, and I'm guessing that most of you did not either. I never held onto the stem of the slingshot—that is, I didn't know why I was going to school, not really, just simply that I had to, and that everyone agreed *this was good*. As a little extra incentive, we heard horror stories about playing hooky and truant officers and never getting a good job.

Even though I didn't know about holding the stem of the slingshot, I was happy and active in school. I did very well, got good grades—but that was that. Because I wasn't holding the stem, when I graduated, when I had the slingshot pulled back as far as I could, nothing happened when I let go, except maybe a dull thud. The slings of the slingshot just fell to the ground. Graduation, at least to me, didn't feel like anything. I didn't even go to them, even though I graduated multiple times. Perhaps some of you did not go. I thought that this was how you moved forward, just casually and even only maybe. It took me a long time to understand that school for me would come from somewhere else.

3.

The arts suffer from a similar paradigm, or lack of one. In a community, we may or may not as individuals like the arts, but valuing the arts generally as a foundational aspect of life, this isn't something we explain to each other very well, not any more—not since we've discovered budgets, controversy, and fast ways to do everything.

What happens, most often, is that we end up each discovering the arts on our own. At some point, we wander into a museum because we want to, not because we have to. Maybe this process is good. Maybe every generation discovering and articulating the arts is an exciting thing, a new chance at understanding. However, that doesn't seem to be working out so well. We don't know how to see the arts as vital anymore. The slingshot—holding onto to something and understanding why, so that when we let go of it we will be propelled, we will feel it—this slingshot is again missing. Rather than me, an individual, not understanding this, it's now us, a whole community. Perhaps a whole nation.

Still, I haven't given up, not at all.

4.

Let me show you this object. It's not a slingshot, at least not a traditional one. Just to tell you very briefly, I got this object when I was about eleven or twelve. I grew up in Nogales Arizona, just north of town. It was a fairly rural area except that across the highway there were some produce warehouses and docks. The companies there would load produce onto the trains heading north. And in the summer that meant one thing to you as a kid: *watermelon*s! We learned that if you climbed up one side of the train car, not only could you liberate some watermelons, but our bodies were made for this. Two shoulders, two watermelons. We would run down the tracks with our prizes and find the perfect place and do that thing that comes out of desire and dream: We would crack the watermelons open and eat just the hearts. All meat, no seeds. They sell watermelons like that in stores now, but back then we had to find the perfect part of the watermelon for ourselves.

Well, one day we were in some train cars. It was late afternoon and suddenly there was a huge explosion, huge—so much so that we blew our cover and poked our heads out and saw a semi truck in roaring flames. It was burning and we all came down to look at it. What is separately interesting is that we were so

good at hiding in the train cars, half the neighborhood was there. Who knew? We thought it was just us. Together we stood around the semi truck and watched it burn. The workers were all there watching it as well. Nobody was yelling at us—all attention was shifted to this phenomenon. Semi trucks were the biggest things in our universe. This one melted and started forming puddles on the ground. It was amazing to me at that age and I watched this thing with great fascination.

The hard, solid world became something else. I came back the next morning. There was still smoke. Incidentally, we were outside the city limits so there was no fire department. The workers just let the truck burn, which made me wonder what they would have done if it were our houses that were on fire? I went up to these various puddles, kicked one up, took it home with me, and put it away. A couple of years ago I found it again. And when I did, I knew what it was.

This is something from my origins. Having this puddle, finding it again, has helped me stay true to my personal story. It helps me understand that I have witnessed some things that only I can explain to the world. It gives me a place to stand. It reminds me that if I were not here, this object would have no meaning. It gives me a job. It gives me a responsibility. I know something that you don't. But it doesn't have to be that way. I can change it. I can tell you the story. This feeling is at the heart of being an artist. This puddle also helps me to imagine that there are things I might not see or readily understand but which are just as important to someone else as this puddle is to me. This strange thing helps me understand other strange things. This is radical and common sense both. This is the arts at their best, when they connect us.

This is all about me as an individual.

5.

What's basic to us as a group, however—what's radical—is community. It's closest to us. Community is fundamental. And what's radical are not the great things that we do, but something else. Arizona is full of big, wonderful things, wonderful people, wonderful places—we are the Grand Canyon State, after all. But this place is filled every bit as much—and far more so—by small things, by the hundred million small moments that make an ordinary Arizona day. We forget the small things too often—they have no newspaper of their own, no radio show, they are not running for office, though they are our greater reality, the way we actually live most of our lives.

As an artist, I hope I speak for the small things today. The big things take good care of themselves, but the small things sometimes need some help. The Grand Canyon speaks for itself. Tempe Town Lake, on the other hand, needs a little help. This is where things like public art and arts administration and artists themselves can all make some real contributions.

Indeed, this is how the arts can make a big difference in a community—by doing what they have always done best to succeed: affecting us one person at a time. This may not be efficient, but it is effective. Every big change is an illusion—it is a conglomeration of a thousand small changes, each of which makes a difference, each of which is a change from dull routine to better understanding. Big money grants, windfall donations, all those sorts of things are wonderful, but they are usually one-time deals. It's what we do with them that matters, and there's the rub. If the small things don't change, then, ultimately, nothing does, no matter how big the headlines. Even Aristotle recognized this, when he said, "We are what we repeatedly do. Excellence, then, is not an act, but a habit." This is the right kind of habit.

6.

For some time now, I have been working on what I call poems of public purpose. This is my contribution, my responsibility to the community. These are poems in which I lend myself out to others, rather

than speaking for myself. I lend myself out to ideas, to community and civic connection. This is a lesson I learned from Pablo Neruda, the great Chilean poet. He is a great artist and I learned this from him that as artists, we much sometimes lend our voices to those who cannot speak. The same way the baker bakes a loaf of bread for us, what do we offer in exchange?—and I'm not talking about money. What do we offer in exchange, what do we offer to others that is as valuable as bread?

One effort of mine that has gotten some nice attention recently is the Words Over Water project, which surrounds Tempe Town Lake.

The City of Tempe commissioned this public art project, which consists of over 600 individual granite tiles surrounding the lake. The purpose of the project is to tell the story of the area, particularly with regard to water. I have written the small poems that are on those tiles and Karla Elling who is here today, implemented the project. It is, in sum, a 600 page, 2 ½ ton, 6 mile long book. It may be the biggest book in the country. The poems I wrote for this project were based on a short poem form called a *greguería*, originated by a turn of the century Spanish poet named Ramon Gomez de la Serna. They are short and create epiphanies but always in a context of gentle humor. 600 pages but I had to write only one thing on each tile. Actually for me the project was only a few words at a time.

Here are some of the things that are written on those tiles.

1. In the desert, water was the animal hunters tracked first.
2. To visit the river quickly, cut an onion.
3. If you dig a hole in the water you will be famous.
4. In the desert, water is the only thing that doesn't taste like chicken. It's so lame but so true.
5. Raindrops on the hard dirt make the ghosts rise. (We know what that is if you live here.)
6. This one is my favorite. It's a little esoteric. Water is gravity's dog, following it everywhere.
7. Water is the blood of the land.
8. Water is the desert's medicine.
9. Water rules kings.

And then one more and this is little kids favorite and when they see this they cluster around it. Here is what it says: 10. Nobody owns water—drink some and try to keep it.

Some of these small poems have found their way into other water projects. That's community dialogue. One good example is the Salt River Project's Arizona Falls celebration at the site of the Phoenix valley's first water power generating site. Some of these poems are inscribed in the concrete floor of the project.

I've been lucky to be involved in a variety of public art projects, all of which I hope carry the power to make some kind of change, by giving people something to remember.

7.

The Governor recently asked me to write a poem commemorating the visit of President Vicente Fox of Mexico to Arizona. This was another kind of poem of public purpose, and one I was eager to do. It gave me a chance to speak for so many of us who are not politicians, but whose lives are nonetheless affected by the conversations that were about to happen. Let me read that poem.

Border Lines

A weight carried by two
Weighs only half as much.

The world on a map looks like the drawing of a cow
In a butcher's shop, all those lines showing
Where to cut.

But that drawing of the cow is also a jigsaw puzzle,
Showing just as much how very well
All the strange parts fit together.

Which way we look at the drawing
Makes all the difference.
We seem to live in a world of maps:

But in truth we live in a world made
Not of paper and ink but of people.
Those lines are our lives. Together,

Let us turn the map until we see clearly:
The border is what joins us,
Not what separates us.

Líneas Fronteras

Un peso cargado por dos
Pesa no más de la mitad.

El mundo en un mapa parece el dibujo de una vaca
En la carnicería, todas esas líneas demuestrando
Donde cortar.

Pero ese dibujo de la vaca es también un rompecabezas,
Demostrando cómo todas las piezas extrañas
Caben muy bien juntas.

La manera en que miramos las marcas del dibujo
Hace toda la diferencia.
Nos parecemos vivir en un mundo de mapas:

Pero en verdad vivimos en un mundo hecho
No de papel ni de tinta pero de gente.
Esas líneas son nuestras vidas. Juntos,

Debemos dar vuelta al mapa hasta que vemos claramente:
La frontera es lo qué nos ensambla,
No lo qué nos separa.

8.

These kinds of poems, poems of public purpose, contribute to something I call the "Ivory Street." For me, this is a combination of the ivory tower in which I work and the real place in which I live. It brings together the best of both of them.

But I didn't start out in such a privileged position. None of us do. And I couldn't always do the job that needed to be done. It took many years to even figure out what that job even was—that is, what the job of an artist was in today's very curious world. Still, finding meaningful words has always been on my mind and in what I do.

In 1979, I won a fellowship from the National Endowment for the Arts. I could have spent that money so many different ways. But the opportunity, I could recognize even then, was a special thing. And its impact has stayed with me, and led me to what I do now. This is arts administration at its best. The NEA has since asked me to writer about this experience, and this is what I said.

The NEA helped make me, to loosely quote Pablo Neruda, a writer of public purpose.

When I received my fellowship in 1979, I had just graduated from the University of Arizona with an MFA, and had no particular plan other than to write. If jobs are scarce now, they were even scarcer then. I had just married and, true to my childhood, moved from Tucson back to rural Arizona, seven miles south of Florence, now that's rural, in an area known as Cactus Forest. There I was.

My NEA grant was for $10,000, and I bought a car. I know what you are thinking. The car, however, helped make me a writer and a teacher; it let me make my job be anywhere and everywhere. I found the classroom to be many places.

The car was red, to be wild—I think to show what I felt in my heart about the whole circumstance—but it was a station wagon, too, which spoke to the work I knew it would mean. I was never sorry.

This working everywhere, with anyone: this has stayed with me. If the teaching was a scramble of a livelihood in those days, Poets-In-the-Schools, community forums, library talks, I nevertheless remember it only as a joy, and the foundation of what would soon become my university teaching. Writing mattered, and was a passion, even if, in the fields of Eloy, or in the shadows of the Superstitions in Apache Junction, people had never spoken this secret aloud. The NEA helped me to find this out—about them and about myself.

I still can't believe I bought a red station wagon. I think there was some tangled idea of the Ivory Street in that purchase.

9.

The arts in civic life—sometimes they do a job, like articulating the story of the lake and of water itself; but just as often, the arts cannot do the job that needs to be done. In that case, what the arts can do, and what they do best, is to tell the story and carry its news, but they do it in a way very different from an application or a complaint or a legislature. They do it through poems, music, painting, storytelling, essays, sculpture, bookmaking, and everything else artists can think of.

Working all over Arizona gave me a sense of the stories of this place, and of the news that I needed to carry. Let me share with you one of my favorite visits.

In the late seventies and early eighties, I was involved in the when I think it was still called Poets in the Schools, PITS. One fall I found myself doing a residency at an elementary school outside Sells, west of Tucson, on the then-called Papago reservation—they are now the Tohono O'odham, their own name for themselves. I worked primarily with third and fifth graders, both in and out of class, throughout my time there.

On this same visit, however, I also worked with another group of kids—second graders. But there was more to their story. When I started this residency, the principal asked me if I would consider this class. They were, she warned, developmentally disabled—what we called retarded development—and, not only that, they only spoke Papago. No English.

How on earth could I work with them, really? Since it seemed impossible, I of course said yes, right away.

The group was rowdy, and ready for something, though working together or focusing were not their immediate strengths. With the help of the teacher aides who translated everything, and whom the kids really loved because these aides were their real contact with the world, and their advocates, we did a few things. Mostly we talked, and I tried to turn the talking into stories. But that was it, in the beginning. They couldn't write yet, and some of their attention situations were reasonably serious.

When I went home after each of these first visits, I thought about how this was not working very well. They couldn't understand me, which added to their lack of attention, and I couldn't understand them, which made the concept of teaching seem out of reach.

And then it hit me. Language was a barrier here, not a solution—something doesn't suit language very well. And then it occurred to me that I was thinking of language the way we so often do—as words, instead of what those words mean to represent. I had an idea.

When I came to school next, I brought with me a whole tray of paper lunch bags, tied up with ribbons and fancy strings—they looked a little like gifts.

When I put these at the front of the room, everybody was interested for the moment. Then I opened one, poked my nose into it, and declared: There's a chicken in here!

They all laughed, and didn't believe me. Then I took the bag around to each of them and let them smell. Sure enough, it was a chicken. Then I said, there's something different in each of these bags, and they're all from your house.

Nobody believed me. I let the first child have one of the bags, had him open it, then asked him not to tell me what was inside the bag, but where was this smell in his house.

He thought about it and then he said and I will never forget this. He said, *that's my father*. I said yes, I thought he was right, and that it was my father, too. That was the pivotal moment. And the games began.

What I had done was to put things that smelled into the bags, and let them percolate overnight, so they were redolent by the time I took them to the school. I had put some chicken in one, and some Old Spice after-shave in the second. The boy went on to talk about his father shaving, and how he took so long in the bathroom, and how he cut himself sometimes. In fact, this boy wouldn't stop talking.

And the pattern repeated itself with almost all the children. What we did on that day was to take the classroom outside of the school, and to recognize its possibility as being elsewhere.

Smell bags. Who would have thought of those scents as a dictionary of those students' lives? But the key was, it was a personal dictionary. A dictionary that mattered. A dictionary full of words that weren't words, but what words are supposed to be.

As a side note, when we had finished and were putting together a book, I asked if anyone had a suggestion for a title. One little kid raised her hand and said "Mr. Rios we don't need one," "We already have one. 'Title One.'" We have gone on to use this idea of smells in scent bags as we have sent Arizona State University students out to work with Alzheimer's patients.

10.

This moment of surprise and discovery was to come back to me many years later when I was traveling in Mexico with a group of poets. We were supposed to meet with the poet Octavio Paz, but he was already too sick, and blind as well. He had a white blindness, as it's called, from cataracts. While he could not meet with us, he sent us a note, a courage, that was said to me like this: "*Ya no estoy en la tierra, estoy en las nubes. Pero en las nubes hay cosas bonitas."*—I'm not on Earth anymore, I'm in the clouds. But in the clouds there are beautiful things."

Octavio Paz could see, even where we could not, a sense of beauty that did not abandon him, and which speaks to the best that the world has to offer us if we can just see it, no matter who we are or what our circumstances. This was a lesson to us, a reminder about what we were each capable of. As artists, it is our job to help others understand this potential in all of us.

11.

I know now you've got to go and try to articulate the importance of the arts to your friends, your administrators, your funding sources. In a time of budgetary constraint, who can defend spending time with a poem about a jigsaw puzzle, really? Or teaching one person at a time. Or even five. Or taking chances on artists, not knowing what will happen. Well, we—here in this room—we can defend that. But we've got to know why. We've got to be holding some version of the slingshot. We've got to feel the answers as much as think them.

Still, we're not going to make people listen to us by yelling or by whining. Ours is something else, some other way. And it's work.

And in working with other people, we might consider as well that we should look beyond the Golden Rule, which is a wonderful prompt, but which assumes our perspective—*Do Unto Others*. It's the world from where we stand. But perhaps we can rephrase it as something like this: Let us receive unto ourselves an understanding of others beyond their words, as others have worked to understand us.

Winston Churchill said: "Courage is what it takes to stand up and speak; courage is also what it takes to sit down and listen."

Don't be afraid to listen. What may be surprising is that we, as artists and arts administrators, may not be listening to each other. We are creative, intelligent, enterprising people. We likely have something to say to each other, something substantial. We have much to share, and we need to support each other in brave directions. Perhaps all we have is stories to tell each other, but maybe too that's part of the answer. We've got a responsibility to make time to listen.

The actions of the new century, finally, can mean many things, but they will work best in their oldest suit of clothes—as a function of the heart.

12. Love poems

Be prepared to be inventive, and then to be surprised. Guillaume Apollinaire, the French symbolist poet, said that—in their best moment—when humans wanted to reinvent the leg, they invented the wheel, which does not resemble a leg. In finding a new world of movement, we looked not to what we knew, but to what we wanted. I try to think this way as a writer and as a person. Our leaps toward understanding the new century must be bold, and we must recognize that they will be found in PLACES we do not expect. A wheel does not look like a leg. Let us embrace the surprise—and the difference.

Let me read two very short poems I wish I had written that express this idea of looking in surprising places very nicely, and then I will finish with five important challenges.

The two poems were both written by junior high school students I worked with many years ago. I don't remember their names. Both are love poems, but far from the greeting card variety. The first poem was written by a boy about a girl whom he loved who was in the same classroom, and who did not love him back—hence he could name her only one thing:

Ms. X.

Ms. X., you are central Missouri.
I grew up there,
I had my horse there,
And I want to go back.

The second offering is not about unrequited love at all, but what it is also remains difficult to name. This is the effort of a young woman, writing about her boyfriend in another class whose name was Johnny. As a sidebar to this, it seems remarkable how many boyfriends in junior high are named Johnny. He really gets around.

Johnny

Johnny, you are a spoon.
I hold you,
I eat with you,
I make music with you.
But, you're just one of a set.

As artists as writers you can see what they were doing. In both cases, by thinking about and staying with the characteristics of the other object, the spoon and central Missouri, the girl and boy they are writing about were easily seen, the objective other, our true subjects are easily, and innovatively, seen. Though the references to other objects may at first have been whimsical sparks, we are nevertheless led by them toward a clear and greater, and probably surprising, truth. Had the authors in these cases attempted to write directly about the people they were describing, the outcome would have been far more predictable.

Instead, they found their poems by honestly listening where they did not expect to find answers.

15. Challenges

All right. Let me finish with five challenges, both institutional and personal. Five radical challenges, if you'll remember that word from the beginning of this talk—that is, five challenges that are close to us, not abstract or far away. Five challenges we can do something about, each of us.

1. Diversity. Diversity in the new century should be a starting point, not a goal. The days of thinking of it as a goal and nothing more are passing us by. What now, what next, what for—these are the next-step challenges, and they face us now. The Rev. Martin Luther King, Jr. said something similar when he stated that "One day we must come to see that peace is not merely a distant goal we seek, but that it is a means by which we arrive at that goal." Peace is not a goal. Diversity is not a goal. Not anymore. They are not the endgame. They are the means by which we arrive at something greater, something we are not articulating very well.
2. Invisible populations. Who are we **not** serving? Who did we try to serve—only to see them go away? Why did we let them leave, and assume they wanted to or that we could not stop them? Did we want them to stay? Did we let them in to begin with? Who are they?
3. Economics. This echoes the RAND report. I was very excited to hear this. Running everything as a corporate business is a contemporary invention. It is new to the world, and often hostile to the people it purports to serve. We must push toward its next evolutionary step and start by saying it this way: *human* economics.
4. Dialogue. In our discourses with each other, we have moved away from "show, don't tell," which is at the basis of every arts classroom. We have moved instead to "argue" and "dig in" and "don't get voted off the island." The thing is, you don't "die" if you enter into "dialogue." You die if you don't. And in this dialogue, we must show each other once more why there is value in thinking.
5. Languages. We must stop thinking of languages in terms of "either-or." We must seize the opportunity to think of them instead as "also-and." There are many languages for a reason. What's interesting about this assertion—it suggests that because there are many languages, then there are also many answers for how to deal with the world. I would call this the language of listening.

9. Conclusion

To conclude, simply and finally, these challenges—which are also part of the arts, part of the responsibility of the arts: They're all about hope—hope, and what each of us is doing individually to underscore its necessary centrality, especially in how we teach and think and affect the lives of other people. These are radical ideas, but not scary ones. How to start? For me as a writer, from my point of view, I would say it very simply this way: *Every pencil is filled with a book.*